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Staging the Authority of the Ulama

The Celebration of the Mawlid in Urban Syria

The ulama are a particularly uncommon topic for ethnography. As the paragons of literate culture in classical Muslim societies, they have more than often been studied through their writings and sermons, that is, through their discourse. This article focuses on other kinds of practices and more particularly on the annual celebration of Muhammad's birthday (Mawlid)¹ in mid-2000s Damascus, Syria. Academic literature on the celebration of Muslim prophets and saints has been mostly concerned with the popular pilgrimages which, like in Egypt, frequently involve what puritans describe as 'un-Islamic' practices (mixing of sexes, dance, and even alcohol consumption and prostitution).² Little attention has been paid so far to the fact that the Mawlid is also celebrated in public by the self-proclaimed custodians of orthodoxy, that is, Muslim scholars.

The goal of this article is to show that ethnography allows grasping aspects of the 'scholarly' *mawālīd* that generally remain concealed in the discourses produced by social actors. These discourses can be categorized as either controversial or consensual. The first category is concerned with the disputes over the definition of orthodoxy and orthopraxy and consists either in controversies stirred up by Salafi opponents of the Mawlid,³ or in normative statements on the boundaries of its correct performance, which entails the denunciation of the abovementioned 'un-Islamic' behaviours. The second category of discourses is mostly composed of speeches pronounced during the celebration and of articles released in the media as the Mawlid approaches. They propagate an idealized conception of the latter's purposes, which revolve around the ideas of morality and identity: on the one hand, speakers and writers call their audience to imitate the exemplary behavior of Muhammad and stress the need to

abide by his Sunna; on the other hand, they present the birthday of the Messenger of God as the best occasion to re-unite his followers against their enemies. The latter framing of the Mawlid fits functionalist conceptualizations of celebrations as devices aimed at cementing a community's unity through the remembrance of its 'founding myth'. Unsurprising, from that point of view, is the fact that in Syria, the *mawālīd* easily take political overtones. In the 1960s-1970s, they sometimes turned into openly anti-Ba'athist meetings.⁴ In 2006, celebrations started a few weeks after the Danish cartoons affair and US/EU non-recognition of the elected Hamas government in Palestine, which led to the flourishing of anti-Western speeches on these occasions.⁵

However, observing how *mawālīd* are performed – rather than merely listening to what is said about or during them – reveals another important dimension of the celebrations of the Prophet's birthday. Indeed, this article will show that the ulama have given the *mawlid* a shape that not only reflects their concern for orthopraxy, all 'un-Islamic' practices being carefully avoided, but also conveys a strongly hierarchical meaning. As a result, in urban Syria, the *mawlid* appears as a celebration of the clergy rather than of the community as a whole.

This article relies on observations that were carried out between 2006 and 2008 in about twenty mosques of Damascus. Except for the urban focus (my fieldwork did not cover the countryside because the ulama are predominantly found in cities), and the fact that I was allowed to attend male celebrations only, there was no particular bias in the choice of these mosques: they were located in areas with different social and economic characteristics (from popular, semi-rural outskirts to posh housing estates), and my sample included both pro-regime and more independent worship places.

2. Description

Every year in the cities of Syria, the twelfth day of the lunar month of Rabi‘ al-Awwal marks the beginning of the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday (*al-ihṭifāl bi-l-mawlid al-nabawī al-sharīf*). This period, which lasts for more or less six weeks, is the most important of the religious year second to Ramadan. *Mawālīd* are organized every evening in different mosques, which on that occasion are decorated with light bulbs, banners and green pennants. These celebrations are huge popular success, some of the largest mosques welcoming more than 5,000 people on that occasion.

Each celebration lasts for three or four hours starting from one of the two evening’s prayers. Following the latter, the crowd progressively fills the neon-lighted mosque then sits on carpets towards the *qibla*. In the largest worship places, which sometimes have several floors, staff members show the way to the visitors looking for remaining available space. The main prayer hall is occupied by men only whereas women congregate on a separate floor or side room. Like the men seated in the back of the mosque, women can sometimes watch the ceremony on television screens thanks to one or (depending on the organizers’ financial means) several cameras whose images are edited live by a control room. In some wealthy neighbourhoods, images are also displayed on a giant screen outside the mosque. When everybody is seated, the staff distributes water, Arabic coffee (strong and non-sweetened), sugar-coated almonds wrapped in aluminum foil, and in some cases, plastic flags for children bearing slogans such as ‘He [Muhammad] lives in our hearts’, ‘Let’s revive His Sunna’, or ‘We follow His Sunna’.

In one corner of the mosque sits a group of *munshidūn* (religious singers), whose chants in honour of the Prophet are amplified by a powerful sound system and will be heard throughout the evening. The *munshidūn*'s appearance allows identifying them as artists: unlike clerics, they wear impeccable suit and tie and prefer a moustache, three day stubble or even smooth-face to long beard; unlike ordinary laymen, they often refrain from cutting their hair short on the back of the neck. However, their performance strictly abides by the rules of Sharia as defined by the Damascene religious elite, who forbids any kind of dancing as well as the use of musical instruments except for percussions, in this case tambourines.

Against the *qibla*'s wall, facing the public, 'VIPs' are seated on two or three rows of plastic chairs, benches, and, for the most distinguished of them, leather armchairs. The center of the front row is reserved for the *shuyūkh* ('sheikhs'), that is, the ulama. They are recognizable by their serious and hieratic attitude, their white turban or scarf as well as by their distinctive garb, which for this special occasion is often a gilt-edged robe (*jubba*). By their sides sit junior clerics as well as lay notables, most of which are merchants. The latter, who are commonly called *hajj* ('pilgrim'), often display outward signs of religiosity such as a short beard, sober ankle-length tunic (*dishdasha*), and white prayer cap (*taqiya*). In some cases, more prominent businessmen with a moustache and elegant suit are also present. For members of the private sector, enjoying a place of prestige in a *mawlid* is often a symbolic reward for donations to the mosque and its charitable activities. Consequently, as the audience easily guesses, the warmer a merchant is greeted on his arrival, and the closer to the ulama he is invited to sit, the greater his generosity. In some cases, auction-like fund raising sessions organized during the *mawlid* itself allow wealthy people to publicly display their readiness to spend money 'in the path of God'.⁶ Such a way of enhancing one's reputation is particularly convenient for those businessmen who aim at being elected to the Parliament as 'independent'

deputies. For instance, during the 2007 electoral campaign, which coincided with the season of the Mawlid, some candidates toured the mosques of the capital in order to reap the symbolic benefits of their previous donations. The 'diplomatic' dimension of the *mawlid* also concerns the men of religion themselves: ulama who are on good terms systematically invite one another, while publicly welcoming a representative of a rival clerical faction is also a common means to initiate a *détente*.

The rows of chairs are occupied by two categories of people: the hosts, including, the sheikh of the mosque,⁷ his senior disciples, and his notable supporters, on the one hand, and guest clerics and other notables, on the other hand. In general, guests do not attend the entire celebration, which results in ceaseless comings and goings between the entrance of the mosque and its 'choir'. In order to reach the latter, distinguished visitors have to go through the crowd, sometimes thanks to a passage delimited by cordons. On their way, they are greeted by a disciple of the sheikh-organizer. Once they reach the choir, the ulema and notables who are already present stand up from their chairs to exchange hugs or handshakes with the newcomers. By greeting each other in such a way, hosts and visitors display a sense of social equality, and therefore of superiority over common people, since the latter usually salute clerics by kissing their hand. Particularly old and respected sheikhs are subject to special treatment. When they are among the hosts, they do not stand up when guests arrive but rather wait for them to come and kiss their hand or forehead. Likewise, if they are among the visitors, they are immediately surrounded by respectful hosts when they reach the chair rows, which they sometimes do on an improvised litter borne by three or four young men. Some guests might also choose to sit among the audience out of modesty. In this case, the host-sheikh sends one of his disciples in order to go and get them.

Half a dozen times during the evening, religious hymns stop to make place for the ulama's speeches. As mentioned above, these speeches usually take advantage of the occasion to deal with issues of morality and Islamic unity. The first of them is pronounced by the master of ceremony, in general a close disciple of the sheikh of the mosque. The latter's address, which occurs later in the evening, is generally the most important moment of the ceremony. As a gesture of respect, major guest clerics are often asked to speak too. The celebration closes with an invocation (*du'ā'*) led by a scholar chosen for his ripe old age – which is synonymous of godly blessing (*baraka*), for his remarkable eloquence, or for some 'diplomatic' reason.

Throughout the evening, the crowd watches the 'show' and generally remains quiet and still. It does not sing along with the *munshidūn* and is not even invited to do so. Except for the concluding prayer and invocation, the only participation that is requested from the audience – above all a way to ensure its attention – is to pronounce the ritual formula 'May Allah honor Him and grant Him peace' (*sallā Allah 'alayhi wa sallam*) each time the Prophet's name is mentioned in a speech.

Spending many hours in Syrian *mawālīd* has often led me to wonder if the audience was really content with a very formal ceremony that provides it with so little entertainment, let alone with an atmosphere of spirituality similar to that of the Sufi *dhikr* sessions. A possible answer would be that people are not looking for fun but rather abide by a religious and social obligation.⁸ This is partly true, of course, but many Syrians well and truly expect some entertainment from the *mawlid*. In particular, a sizeable proportion of them are obviously more interested in its musical dimension than in anything else. For instance, one of my informants was not attending the *mawlid* in the mosque of his own sheikh because hymns were sung there by a choir of students whose voices he deemed 'ordinary'. He was rather

going to another place known for hiring ‘the best *munshid* in Syria’. During another *mawlid*, hearing a foreign female spectator marveling at the lead singer’s voice, a woman seated next to her said: ‘why do you think we’re here?’⁹ Accordingly, video CDs of the celebrations that are sold on pavements and in Islamic bookshops are frequently edited in order to cut the ulama’s speeches, thus leaving only religious hymns. The people’s quest for ‘real fun’ is also obvious in the rare outdoor *mawālīd* that have been allowed by the authorities from the mid-2000s as part of a progressive relaxation of the restrictions on Sunni religious activities. Held in pedestrian areas or public gardens, such celebrations sometimes include more festive features such as whirling dervishes, who are now mostly professional dancers. Outside the sacral space of the mosque, spectators behave differently: they remain seated but are frequently seen singing enthusiastically while ‘dancing’ by moving their arms. Whereas the organizers prevent people from actually dancing by disapprovingly waving at the few spectators who stand up out of enthusiasm, they do not so as far as ‘seated dancers’ are concerned. Nevertheless, some clerics privately condemn this attitude and assert that *mawālīd* should remain inside the mosques in order to avoid such ‘excesses’.

Even indoor, however, Muslim scholars do not always manage to prevent the crowd from turning the *mawlid* into a real ‘party’. That is what I observed in a mosque of the very petty bourgeois Southern Midan quarter in April 2007. As usual, the *mawlid* began as a tribute to the ulama and more precisely to the ninety-year-old, paralytic sheikh of the mosque. Emotion rose as soon as the venerable cleric was carried into the mosque by three robust men. People crowded around him to touch his clothes in order to get some of his *baraka*. Indeed, this sheikh is viewed as a saint because of the seventy years he has spent providing religious education to the people of the quarter, because of his Sufi affiliation as well as because of his anti-regime credentials, since he took refuge in Lebanon during the 1980s uprising and was

abducted there by the Syrian secret services. Later in the evening, devotion to the scholar's persona constituted a pretext for the audience to break the protocol.

The 'incident' occurred after the sheikh's senior students started a Sufi *dhikr*, which is not uncommon in a *mawlid*. According to the Shadhili tradition to which the sheikh is affiliated, the *dhikr* is a tightly organized collective practice where participants form concentric circles or squares then follow the rhythm set by the 'master of ceremony'. In the present case, however, ranks rapidly broke apart when enthusiastic young people headed towards the centre of the prayer hall then started to run in circle around the chair of the sheikh. Seeing that things were getting completely out of control, the organizers abruptly put an end to the *dhikr*. In order to calm the participants, they invited them to stand in a queue in order to kiss a relic of the Prophet contained in a small cushion (a practice known as *taqbīl al-āthār*, 'kissing the relic'). Whereas in such circumstances, the faithful generally wait for their turn in a very orderly fashion, this time, overexcited young people were literally fighting with each other in order to get access to the cushion. Staff then asked the audience to leave the mosque, throwing handfuls of candy into the courtyard in order to encourage the younger members to do so. After a few more boxing between young teenagers, the place eventually emptied.

3. Comments

Syrian ulama often oppose the orthopraxy of their *mawālīd* to the 'un-Islamic' practices that are observed in the religious festivals of countries like Egypt. In the latter, indeed, reformist attempts at 'civilizing' popular religious festivals have only partially succeeded,¹⁰ whereas in Syrian cities, the 'scholarly' *mawlid* – which is in no way a recent custom – ¹¹has been the

only form of public Sunni religious celebration for half a century. This is partly the result of social change and the subsequent spread of modernist-reformist conceptions, which as early as in the 1950s, dealt a fatal blow to popular religious festivals such the ‘Thursday of the Sheikhs’ in Homs.¹² The concern of the Ba‘thist regime for public order has also played a major role, of course, since most outdoor Sunni festivals were banned from the 1960s on, thus leaving mosques as the only venues for such celebrations. However, as we have seen, a fundamental tension remains between two competing conceptions of the performance of the *mawlid*, that is, the clergymen’s ceremonious approach, on the one hand, and the audience’s quest for entertainment, on the other hand.

Even though it is probably easier to force puritan Damascene bourgeois to sit idly by for several hours than to do the same with peasants of the Nile Delta, the modalities of the *mawlid* I have described in this article are not a mere expression of Syria’s ‘sober’ urban culture: in more popular neighbourhoods, in particular, these modalities remain under the permanent threat of ‘carnivalisation’, with the result that the rules of ‘proper’ conduct must be reasserted by the organizers. What is the cause of the Syrian ulama’s strong commitment to this particular form of *mawlid* performance? In my view, concerns for orthopraxy are important but do not constitute a sufficient explanation.

Using Mikhael Bakhtin’s conceptualization, Samuli Schielke describes the popular Egyptian saints’ festivals as ‘carnivals’, which means that they are characterized by the temporary suspension of usual social norms, and that they know no separation between participants and spectators since they are performed by the latter themselves in a spontaneous and disorderly way.¹³ In Bakhtin’s view, the subversive potential of carnivals explains the dominant classes’ attempts at turning them into ‘spectacles’, that is, celebrations where

performers are clearly distinct from a passive audience. Schielke, who is chiefly concerned with state policies towards the *mawlid*, shows that a diffusionist model – i.e., the spread of modernist conceptions of order and public morality since the 19th century – better explain modern attempts at reforming the Mawlid than Bakhtin's class analysis. In my case study, however, I do think that what is at stake is a certain conception of social order. What Syrian Muslim scholars are protecting by sticking to the current form of *mawlid* – which existed centuries before the emergence of modernist ideas – is less the overall social and political order than their own prestige and authority. Indeed, as it is performed in Syria, the *mawlid* is a theatrical device that stages an idealized social order dominated by the ulama and their notable friends, and celebrates them rather than the community as a whole.

In Bakhtinian terms, the Syrian urban *mawlid* constitutes an ideal-type of 'anti-carnival' because it is a highly ritualized spectacle. The clerics' authority is not only displayed through their monopoly on speech, but more importantly, through the 'formulaic spatiality' of the celebration.¹⁴ Interestingly, this organization radically contradicts the egalitarian scheme of the Muslim collective prayer, where all believers pray in the same direction and, as far as possible, side by side. In the *mawlid*, on the contrary, clerics and notables sit on chairs and *face* common people, who sit on carpets. Hierarchy is thus made even more visible than in the Friday sermon, at the end of which the preacher comes back down from his pulpit in order to pray in company with his coreligionists, or in the Sufi *dhikr*, where the sheikh also occupies a central position but takes place on the perimeter of a circle or square formed by his disciples. In the *mawlid*, moreover, the 'hug ritual' allows the audience to assess the number and quality of the sheikh's friends among notables, that is, his social capital. He is the only one to decide who has the right to sit in pride of place, which is made very clear when distinguished visitors

choose to sit among the crowd then are publicly designated by the host as worthy of being seated with the other notables.

As said above, the fact that the Mawlid celebrates the ulama as much as it glorifies the Prophet is almost never acknowledged by local religious actors. However, a few weeks after my last stay in Syria, in the spring of 2008, I discovered a counter-example in the recently published hagiography of Sheikh ‘Abd al-Karim al-Rifa‘i, a Damascene scholar who died in 1973. Evoking al-Rifa‘i’s commitment to the celebration of the *mawlid*, the text describes the latter in the following way:

Those who enter the mosque on this occasion feel like they are in one of the gardens of Paradise because the ulama, these heirs of the beloved Prophet, are at the centre of the assembly. Through this crowd of Muslims, Damascus displays its joy to belong to this religion as well as its loyalty to its ulama.¹⁵

Such a highly unusual account results from one of the many peculiarities of al-Rifa‘i’s biography: whereas such texts traditionally focus on the Muslim scholars’ incommensurable knowledge and outstanding moral virtues, this one also pays much attention to the sheikh’s social *practices*. It is probably too early to speak of a ‘descriptive turn’ in the Islamic biography genre, but such a new approach reflects deep changes in the conception of Muslim sainthood, an issue that falls outside the scope of this article.

Conclusion

In Syria, the celebration of the Mawlid is presented by its proponents as a way to invite Muslims to come back to the righteous path of the Prophet as well as an occasion for re-uniting them around the founding figure of Muhammad. Ethnography, however, reveals

another aspect of this celebration, i.e., the fact that it is first and foremost a ritualized spectacle staging the authority of the ulama. Indeed, the spatial organization of the ceremony and the theatrical welcome of notables, in particular merchants, make the clerics appear as the dominant element within an idealized social order. In order to maintain this hierarchical pattern, the ulama have to contain the common people's quest for enjoyment and emotion. Even though they do so in the name of orthopraxy, I have shown that what is more fundamentally at stake here is to determine who is to be celebrated during the *mawlid*: either the clergy, or the community as a whole.

¹ Depending on the context, the Arabic term *mawlid* (plur. *mawālīd*) designates the Prophet's birthday itself, its actual celebration, or a celebration that follows the same modalities (see my description below) but is organized at another moment of the year, for instance on the occasion of a marriage or in honor of guests. I will use the written form 'Mawlid' in the first case and '*mawlid*' in the two last ones.

² Mc Pherson, J.W. *The Moulids of Egypt (Egyptian saints-days)*, Cairo, 1941; Biegan, Nicolaas *Egypt. Moulids Saints Sūfis*, Den Haag, 1990; Schielke, Samuli, 'On Snacks and Saints: When Discourses of Rationality and Order Enter the Egyptian Mawlid', *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, no. 135, <http://assr.revues.org/index3765.html> (accessed 30 March 2010).

³ See Johansen, Julian *Sufism and Islamic Reform in Egypt. The Battle for Islamic Tradition*, Oxford, 1996, pp. 70-91 ; Holmes Katz, Marion *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam*, London, 2007, pp. 169-207.

⁴ Buti, Sa'īd Ramadan *Hadha walidī* (This Is my Father), Damascus, 1995, p. 130-131; Hawwa, Sa'īd *Hadhihi tajribati ... wa-hadhihi shahadati* (This Is my Experience ... This Is my Testimony), Cairo, 1987, pp. 130-1.

⁵ Observations by the author.

⁶ Pierret, Thomas, and Selvik, Kjetil 'Limits of 'Authoritarian Upgrading' in Syria. Welfare Privatization, Islamic Charities and the Rise of the Zayd Movement', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 41, no. 4, November 2009, p. 595.

⁷ In Syria, the sheikh of a mosque (an informal title) is the latter's most senior *teacher*, but not necessarily its imam or Friday preacher.

⁸ Attending the *mawlid* is not a formal religious obligation like the two 'Id prayers. However, the social importance of this event is such that many committed Syrian Muslims see it as compulsory.

⁹ I thank Nathalie Bontemps for this anecdote.

¹⁰ Schielke, 'On Snacks and Saints'.

¹¹ On the history of the Mawlid, see De Jong, Frederick 'Mawlid' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., Leiden, vol. 6, p). 895–7; Kaptein, Nico *Muhammad's Birthday Festival: Early History in the Central Muslim Lands and Development in the Muslim West until the 10th/16th Century*, Leiden, 1993.

¹² Gillon, Jean-Yves *Anciennes fêtes de printemps à Homs* (Ancient Spring Festivals in Homs), Damas, 1993, pp. 68-71.

¹³ 'On Snacks and Saints', p. 120. Schielke relies on Bakhtin, Mikhail *Rabelais and His World*, Cambridge, 1968.

¹⁴ Parkin, David 'Ritual as spatial direction and bodily division' in Daniel de Coppet, ed., *Understanding rituals*, London, 1992, pp. 11-25. On this concept, see Ben Hounet's contribution in this volume.

¹⁵ 'Al-shaykh 'Abd al-Karim al-Rifa'i wa masīratuhu al-da'wiyya – 12 (Sheikh 'Abd al-Karim al-Rifa'i and his Course in the Islamic Call), *Sada Zayd* (website), 20 April 2008, <http://www.sadazaid.com/play.php?catsmktba=3165> (access: 30 March 2010).